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ABSTRACT

The first "Student Personnel Point of View" (1937) still stands as the premiere statement of excellence for the student personnel profession. Several propositions are requisites to achieving the goal of development in students. Students, professional staff, and institutions must all achieve their goals. The environment must be developmental and inquiry into the nature of students, environment, and student-environment interaction must be encouraged. Student involvement should be encouraged and interaction among participants must be meaningful. Finally, a balance between education for life and education for work must be achieved. Key issues in excellent practice center around professional skills, leadership, adaptation of practice to setting, aligning college student affairs with liberal arts, teaching, distinguishing between service and developmental goals, sex discrimination in the field, and training and consultation strategies. To help achieve excellence, each professional must assume responsibility for his/her knowledge and conduct, be open to change in the application of skills and knowledge, adopt a spirit of experimentation, and evaluate programs against standards of excellence. Professionals are encouraged to form a vision, translate it into goals, articulate the goals, marshall resources, generate support, advocate goals, demonstrate how implementation of ideas will solve problems and respond to felt needs, and employ multiple strategies. (NB)

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Key Issues in the Practice of College Student Personnel: A Commitment to Excellence [1]

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Fifty years ago, the first Student Personnel Point of View (American Council on Education, 1937) was published and still stands as the premier statement of excellence for the student personnel profession. Its simplicity of form and its precision of insight may explain its durability over five decades of sweeping change in higher education. The revised version published twelve years later provided a more vivid and contemporary context for higher education following the United States' assumption of a world leader role, but the principles of student personnel practice were not altered substantially. No single document since 1937 has surpassed the eloquence of the original Student Personnel Point of View.

An attempt to draft a document of similar stature to the Student Personnel Point of View (SPPV) was launched in 1986 by the leadership of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). The 1987 joint convention of the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and NASPA took its theme from the collective inspiration of the original SPPV to "Make No Small Plans" for the future. A select group of current

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leaders of the field reported progress made in their assignment to the joint convention. The report included a list of beliefs or commitments commonly held by the drafters and they were suggested as possible principles to serve as a foundation for practice for the foreseeable future. The list of principles were good ones. Likely, no one in the profession will disagree with them, though some likely will want other principles added to reflect a perspective believed to be slighted by the current list.

The current framers of a new document quickly abandoned any notion of "up-dating" the SPPV. Perhaps the profession is now too complex to be adequately portrayed in a single, brief statement; perhaps the original SPPV remains seminal in its depiction of the profession. How the current effort to write an important statement about the profession will end up is unknown, but it seems a fair guess that any "new" statement will embody the principles of the "old."

Our reason for assembling today partly is to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Student Personnel Point of View. I intend to offer some comments about excellence in the practice of college student affairs, but I will take my cues from the principles of the SPPV. The focus of my remarks is excellence of practice. What is it? Why have we not achieved it? What are some immediate things we can do to help achieve it?

I ask you to remember that the following principles serve as a foundation for my comments:

1. The SPPV contains the seeds of excellence sufficient for contemporary practice;

2. Promoting development of students is the aim of student affairs; and

3. The disciplines of the liberal arts are "home base" for the practice of student affairs in higher education.

What is Excellent Practice?

There is no consensus response to this question and my comments are not intended to call for one. I intend instead to state some propositions for excellence that I believe are central to the achievement of excellence in practice and that merit consideration. Hopefully, they may serve as guides for practice and represent parameters of excellence in your institutional setting.

Think of these propositions as exhibits of an ultimate goal. The goal is development in students; the exhibits are environmental conditions partly under your influence that are requisites to the achievement of the goal.

Proposition 1: Students achieve their goals. Imagery of the college experience is kaleidoscopic. It is characterized by its richness and contrasts by those who imagine it visually. It

may be imagined viscerally as an emotional experience characterized by personal growth and expanded relationships. When viewed analytically, the college experience is partly understood as actions related to goal setting and achievement.

Often goals are expressed as majors or as careers but not always. Prospective students sometimes describe their intentions in goals of self-improvement or enhanced abilities. Sometimes they have no articulated goals of their own upon initial enrollment. They may be in college because their parents sent them, or because their friends came and they did not wish to be separated from them, or because there was nothing else to do, or because it was the thing to do immediately following graduation from high school.

Sometimes students are unclear about how the college experience leads to the achievement of their goals. It is, of course, especially difficult to see the connection when goals are fuzzy or absent. But a major function of college educators is to help students set or clarify goals, then to work toward their achievement. A clear measure of the success of a college is evidence of the proportion of students who achieved their goals. Whether set before or during college, goal achievement is a mark of effectiveness of the institution.

The role of student affairs professionals in assisting students to set goals and to promote their achievement is well accepted; however, the role is accepted most readily as a

consequence of individual assistance and less well accepted as a measure of institutional effectiveness. Both roles are important but it is the behavior leading to exhibits of institutional effectiveness that is the strongest indicator of excellence in practice. Student affairs professionals need to be associated with policies, procedures, and processes designed to promote goal setting and achievement systematically in all students.

Proposition 2: Professional staff achieve their goals. It is less common to view educators of students as goal seekers than it is to view students as goal seekers; yet, the process of goal setting and achievement is equally important to professionals as it is to students. It is even more uncommon to hold institutional leaders responsible for the success of goal achievement of professional staff. It is often said that only a developing person can assist another person to develop. Likewise, it is possible that only goal achievers are able to assist students to set and achieve goals. A second measure of excellence, then, is the extent to which professional staff achieve their goals.

Excellent student affairs practice suggests a direct involvement with institutional leaders and with all professional and nonprofessional employees of the college to promote a continuous process of goal clarification.

Proposition 3: The institution achieves its goals. It takes a strong, healthy institution to promote achievement of goals by its staff and its students and health of institutions does not come naturally. A definition of institutional health is the extent to which goals are achieved; yet, few of them can be achieved without the concerted effort of employees. As with students and staff, a prerequisite of goal achievement is a clear, pervasive understanding of the goals. It takes work to reach such consensus and it will not happen without strong, consistent leadership. Remember that students are more likely to achieve their goals in an institution clear about its purpose than in one trying to be all things to all people.

Institutional health cannot be achieved if staff members resist their role in making it happen. Student affairs professionals generally have been trained and are rewarded for providing individual assistance to students. It is not enough, however, for student affairs professionals to help students achieve their goals; they must help the institution achieve its goals. It is necessary that student affairs staffs be oriented to roles and functions beyond direct assistance to students. Perhaps they can serve the institution in policy formation, in redesigning procedures, in training and consultation, and in media interventions with prospective and current students.

Proposition 4: The environment is developmental. A developmental college environment is one distinguished by

challenges to the student to change and by supports to the student during times of challenge to manage threats to current self. All college environments are developmental by their nature. Almost all aspects of the college experience contain elements of both challenge and support. For example, teachers and teaching are sources both of challenge and of support offering new knowledge or skill that is sometimes difficult to achieve. Likewise, peer groups offer both challenge and support at once threatening the status quo through encounters with others different from self and reassuring self through companionship.

The role of excellent student affairs operations is to strive for a balance of the two major dimensions of a developmental environment. Too much challenge may lead to excessive threat and to regression in learning or development. Too much support may lead to unwarranted contentment and to no learning or development. Gaining dominion over environmental conditions of challenge and support may be no small feat. It may entail, for example, having influence over the level of expectations set for students and over the level of active involvement required of students. Similarly, the ability to promulgate policies and procedures leading to accurate and continuous assessment and feedback of student progress may be indicated. Such influence on any college campus is rare.

Proposition 5: Inquiry into the nature of students, of the environment, and of the student-environment interaction is encouraged. It seems obvious enough that awareness of student needs is a prerequisite to meeting them. Equally obvious is that knowledge of the precise nature of the elements of the learning environment is necessary if those elements are to be used to program for students. How certain elements of the environment characteristically affect students also is an important piece of knowledge for the college student affairs programmer. The subtle properties of these knowledge areas, however, are not so easily discerned that observation will suffice. It is necessary that on-going scientific study of students, environments, and interactions between the two be common practice if enough is to be known to design learning experiences properly.

What are the correlates of student success on your campus? How do students who succeed differ from those who do not? Are sufficient opportunities available to all students to allow them to meet their needs for affiliation? Are there patterns of behavior, attitudes, aptitudes, values, or other traits of your students that allow for prediction of success or failure? These are the kinds of questions that simply cannot be answered by observation alone. Scientific inquiry is required and an excellent program of student services will guarantee that the convention is encouraged.

Proposition 6: Student involvement is encouraged. Professionals have known intuitively for decades that outcomes of higher education are dependent in part on effort. It is true in every walk of life: we benefit from learning in direct proportion to effort put into the experience. But the principle has remained mysteriously silent or inaccessible in higher education. Since the publication of Involvement in Learning by the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education (1984), however, the concept of involvement as a requisite condition for growth and learning suddenly has become the watchword of strategists in college student affairs programming. Regardless of its history, involvement is a basic indicator of excellence in student affairs.

Proposition 7: Interactions among participants are meaningful. Most research on the effects of college on students indicates that interactions of students with others is a major contribution variable to outcomes in students. Though it may be said that all students interact with their teachers and with some students, the critical issue may be how meaningful the interactions are. Was a lasting relationship formed between student and others? Did the content of the relationship affect the student's thinking or acting? The requirement of college student affairs professionals is to influence the nature of these interactions to ensure their meaningfulness and that is no easy task.

Proposition 8: A balance between education for life and education for work is achieved. Too often college student affairs professionals are associated only with "education for work." They design and execute career development programs. They counsel students about decision making and the topic of concern mostly is about choice of major or of career. They act as if students who have not chosen their career upon entry to college are deficient and must be remediated by direct intervention of college student affairs. Of course, it is not true that "undecided" students have a problem as learners, but college student affairs professionals rarely defend the undecided student; they program to change him or her. Being able to make decisions is an important skill for life, but so is exploration of options prior to firm decision making. The student personnel profession grew out of the liberal arts and members profess allegiance to the values of general education; yet, actions belie such hallow statements. The criterion for excellence is that a balance be achieved between these two historically polar orientations to higher education.

Key Issues in Excellent Practice

Several problems plague the profession and slow its march to excellence. Though many of these problems are interrelated, I will address some of them as if they were discrete contributors to the overall condition of student affairs.

1. The condition that worries me most is that many professionals do not know enough or possess sufficient skills to handle the requirements of professional practice today. This is not to say that these targeted persons know nothing about professional practice. In fact, the opposite is true. They know a great deal about some of the knowledge bases integral to excellent practice and they appear to be satisfied with what they know. They give the impression of not caring about knowledge outside the narrow confines of what they need to know about their specialty. An example might help clarify my point. Most counselors know a lot about psychosocial forms of development and how to promote it on an individual basis. They are good professional educators at the use of one-on-one strategies. They have evidence that they can help others to understand self better and that they can promote change in others. At the same time, they seem amazingly unconcerned about intellectual or cognitive forms of development in individuals and virtually ignorant about issues pertaining to the overall health of the organization. Even though the principles of change pertaining to organizations show considerable overlap with the principles of change of individuals, many student affairs professionals ignore the institution and remain woefully ignorant about intervention strategies aimed at organization development.

There are other endemic areas of weak knowledge and skill among our professionals. Research is an example. Some argue that they do not have the time, but even if they did, they do not

possess even the rudiments of research skill. Most of our practitioners could not carry out a scientific inquiry at their institution if they had no other assignments. Perhaps worse than weak skills, is a condition of apathy about knowledge generated by scientific methods. Comments like, "I am a practical person and I do not care much for theory" indicates simply that such a person neither understands the nature of theory nor of professionalism. The foundation for all our work is theory and professionalism by definition suggests a balanced, scholarly, knowledge-driven set of values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors known to affect subjects in predictable ways. The person who disclaims research in fact disclaims professionalism since it is the methods of science that yields the knowledge for practice.

2. The second problem that hampers the achievement of excellence is inadequacy in leadership. Two problems in this arena stand out for me. One is that too few persons with titles that suggest a clear leadership role in their job description have any vision for the future. The time frame for these persons is today and maybe what is scheduled for the next few days. Even if they think about next year or the year after, what they tend to imagine are ways to do what is being done today without the hassles. There is no vision of a better, different world, only today's world polished up. The second problem of leadership is that too many cannot imagine any other way to accomplish their work than the way it is being done now. I teach programming to graduate students at my University and I am amazed at how few of

them think about their professional roles as a programmer of activities for students. Direct service seems to be what most of them understand. Designing programs, built on theory and research knowledge, unique to a particular set of requirements, is a very difficult task for most graduate students. It appears to be too much for most "leaders" as well. Tradition and conventional wisdom seem to dominate the thinking of our leaders. Despite their frequent comments to the contrary, maintenance of the status quo distinguishes the standard operating procedures of student affairs leaders.

3. A third issue hampering the achievement of excellence in student affairs is that little adaptation of practice occurs according to setting. Two-year colleges mimic practices in the four-year colleges despite vast differences in clientele and curricular objectives. Urban, commuter university practice in student affairs has a striking resemblance to residential university practice despite broad variation in the nature of the student/faculty and student/student interactions. Such a record of nonadaptation is related partly to the leadership issue already mentioned and partly to the similarities of people and needs regardless of type of institution enrolled. But the conditions that exhort adaptative response far outweighs the conditions that imply blind acceptance of conventional programs.

4. The historical alignment of college student affairs and the liberal arts has been lost to most practitioners. Professionals today deny their disciplinary affiliations with

liberal, or general, education even though the goals of the two areas are virtually identical. Many of our practitioners speak of their goals as if no one else in the college or university shared in efforts to help students achieve them. We need more connection with our teaching colleagues in the liberal arts. Together, more can be done to promote the mutual goals of the two faculties. Examples of particular difficulty as seen from the perspective of student affairs are found in our attempts to promote moral and ethical development. While it is not impossible to accomplish outside the classroom, it is far easier and more likely to occur on systematic basis if done in the classroom amidst consideration of such subjects as literature, history, and ethics. Promoting critical thinking is a key objective of general education. Most student affairs professionals ignore the objective even though it is central to growth in the cognitive domain. Realignment with the liberal arts implies more than a strategic benefit to college student affairs; it indicates the centrality of college student affairs practice. It is only as student affairs is seen as central to the educational objectives of the college or university that excellence in practice can be claimed.

5. College student affairs professionals do not teach. Colleges are organized around the teaching function. The system supports teaching through mainline funding and policy orientation. Many student affairs functions can be conducted well in a teaching format, such as career and life planning and

learning about self. This limitation on the achievement of excellence is not totally the fault of student affairs professionals. Many faculty coalition groups resist student affairs attempts to "intrude" into the curriculum and administrators refuse to support the efforts. Such impediments constitute real barriers to excellence.

6. We have made too much of any distinction between service and developmental goals. There are some distinctions to be sure but they are mutually reinforcing rather than mutually exclusive. I believe that we can blur any important differences between the two orientations by adopting the strategic goals of the Study Group on the Conditions of Excellence in American Higher Education to promote student involvement, set high expectations, and provide continuous assessment and feedback. The lack of importance of any distinction between service and development goals can be appreciated by acknowledging the enormity of the tasks associated with accomplishing the recommendations of the Study Group. Until student affairs can claim considerable control over the institutional conditions that enable or inhibit the fulfillment of each of the three recommendations, it cannot justify a claim of excellence.

7. There remains evidence of discrimination against women professionals in our field. Despite the preponderance of women entering the field, and the occasional example of women in leadership roles, the field of student personnel remains dominated by male values. Men frequently make more money than

women in similar jobs. The "rules of the game" for professional advancement are masculine in nature. Much needs to be done to change these conditions. Unlike some of the other issues already mentioned, the resolution of this issue is within our grasp if we are willing to put forth the effort.

8. Finally, the profession seems to have systematically rejected several methods of practice that could speed up the achievement of excellence. Specifically, we need to employ more strategies of training and consultation in place of direct service, we need to use media as an intervention strategy to a greater extent, and we need to use the methods of the scientist, especially the methods of research, to accomplish our goals. Much of what we know needs to be done to accomplish our goals can be carried out by others. Peer counselors often are better than professional counselors, for example. We need to train them, then serve them as supervisors and consultants. The same is true for helping classroom teachers to accomplish goals such as promoting moral reasoning. It is best done in the classroom, but teachers may need help to do it well. The use of electronics to communicate with students offers enormous opportunity for redesigning programs, such as in academic advising. Interactive communications through mainframe technology allows sweeping changes in the approaches to advising and registration of students.

What Can Professionals Do To Help Achieve Excellence Practice?

It is easy to be overcome with powerlessness when the magnitude of the job is viewed at once. The task looks different when viewed part by part.

The first requirement is that each professional assume responsibility for his or her own knowledge and conduct. Self-assessment is indicated to determine adequacy. Where deficiencies are found, it is the responsibility of the professional to remedy the condition. It is especially critical that any deficiencies in the following areas be remediated:

Organization theory and development

Ethics

Research skills

The second requirement is openness to change in the application of skills and knowledge. It is ironic that student affairs professionals who engage constantly in processes to promote change in others are so reluctant to change themselves. There are many ways to accomplish the same goals in student affairs and we must be open to using alternative methods since it is clear that our current methods will not allow for the achievement of excellence in practice. Limitations of resources mitigate against success of many of our current approaches.

The third requirement is the adoption of a spirit of experimentation in our work. We must accept a problem-solving attitude and adopt the scientific method of inquiry and experimentation in our procedures. It is necessary that we be

inquisitive about our clients and our procedures, that we be analytical about our skills and results, that we use practices of inquiry to discover realities invisible by observation, and that we apply new knowledge of our work unimpeded by personal bias.

We must publish our findings. It is through this professional activity that criticism is elevated to its keenest level. Sharing knowledge is a central activity of professionalism and receiving critical feedback is the surest way to improve practice.

Next, we must engage in constant dialogue with our colleagues regardless of role within the institution. We must be open to approaches favored by others. We must consider carefully all evidence of success and failure of our practices. We must share accountability for the achievement of student goals with all educators. In short, we must talk with all colleagues, then join hands to work with them.

The dialogue then must be elevated to interactions beyond the institution to the state and national levels. We learn from one another for sure, and what we need to learn is basic knowledge and state of the art methods. It is not enough, however, to merely copy others' methods; they must be adapted to meet the special requirements of a particular setting.

Another step that must be taken if we are to achieve excellence of practice is to evaluate our programs against the criteria listed in the first section of this paper. It is against the standards or definitions of excellence that we must

make judgments of adequacy. It is not enough that some students use our services. Use is a modest standard, especially when it is applied only to a select few. We must know of the multiple effects of our services on all our students such as is revealed by the employment of real indicators of learning and development. Using goal achievement as a criterion measure, for example, implies that goals are known, that they are clearly articulated, and that progress toward them are monitored and usefully symbolized in universal language. Likewise, achieving a balance between challenge and support in the environment suggests that we want to change our students and it is the changes in them that must be measured.

Leadership Needed for the Achievement of Excellent Practice

Earlier discussion about leadership focused on its general inadequacy in the profession. These comments focus on, "What can I do to make a difference?" and address issues of inducing change in an organization. These ideas are taken from theoretical research of Creamer and Creamer (1986; in press) and are generalizations from their Probability of the Adoption of Change Model.

Formulate a vision. First, there must be ideas--ideas for better practice. This is absolutely a prerequisite. Without there first being an idea of better practice, there is no chance of change beyond random or accidental change.

Translate the vision into goals. The leader must articulate the vision in language of the organization--perhaps describing general problems of the organization and how the ideas in the vision might solve the problems.

Articulate the goals and ways to meet them widely. There are two tasks embedded in this procedure. First, the goals are communicated in a variety of ways to all constituents, and, second, specific plans regarding how each constituent group can help to meet the goals are communicated. It is likely that plans for implementation will vary across the constituent groups and the leader must be prepared to address the demands of each group.

Marshall resources. Money, personnel, technical knowledge, facilities, and technology are included in resources. Competition for resources is a major source of resistance to change. It is important that sufficient resources are available without igniting competition.

Generate support; create ownership. Support for ideas often must be generated within constituent groups. Faculty and administrators must understand the idea, see how it will help solve problem, agree to the manner of their participation, and, finally, accept the goals of the idea as their own.

Advocate the goals; encounter resistance. Leaders must champion their causes. It is important that they personally encounter resisters and address their concerns.

Demonstrate how implementation of ideas will solve widespread problems and respond to felt needs. There must be a

likelihood that the ideas will produce benefits to large numbers in the institution. The advantage probability must be clear.

Employ multiple strategies. Many approaches normally are needed to ensure lasting change. Be certain that communication about the intent of the strategies is clear to all constituents and that progress be monitored.

Summary

There can be no better way to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Student Personnel Point of View than for each person assembled here to dedicate himself or herself to the realization of the aims of excellence embedded in the 1937 document. Those aims honored the values of a democratic society and the developmental purposes of education. Beyond direct service to students, the document did little to prescribe how to reach the aims. Student personnel professionals were exhorted to integrate their efforts with teaching and we have failed to heed the advice. It is time to remember the advice and to rededicate ourselves to our historical lineage in the liberal arts. It is through such a combined effort with our colleagues in the basic disciplines of higher learning that our future will be told.

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